

## Matthew 26:47-56

### Intercession that Didn't Take Place

*Thinkest thou that I cannot now pray to my Father, and he shall presently give me more than twelve legions of angels? – v. 53.*

We're told in Rom. 8:34 that Christ makes intercession for Christians. So we read: *Who is he that condemneth? It is Christ that died, yea rather, that is risen again, who is even at the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for us.* And in Heb. 7:25 our salvation is traceable to Christ's intercession. And not just salvation but salvation to the uttermost. So we read there: *Wherefore he is able also to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by him, seeing he ever liveth to make intercession for them.*

When you see how closely Christ's atoning death is linked to His intercession then you're able to make a pretty strong case for what some mistakenly call a *limited atonement*. We know from John 17 that Christ doesn't make intercession for all the world. He says so Himself. Jn. 17:9 *I pray for them: I pray not for the world, but for them which thou hast given me; for they are thine.* And yet salvation to the uttermost is attributed to the intercession of Christ. So if He shed His blood with equal reference to all who are in the world then why wouldn't He pray for all who are in the world? His atonement was obviously intended for those for whom He did pray.

Interestingly enough, both ideas of His atoning death and His intercession come together in the 12<sup>th</sup> verse of Isaiah 53 - Isa 53:12 *Therefore will I divide him [a portion] with the great, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong; because he hath poured out his soul unto death: there's the idea of His atonement. He has poured out His soul unto death. And then the verse continues: and he was numbered with the transgressors; and he bare the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.* So salvation is attributed to His atoning death and salvation is also attributed to His intercession. And so we see that His intercession and His atoning death are very closely joined.

You could say that His atoning death, or His shed blood provides the grounds for His intercession or that His intercession springs from what was accomplished by His atoning death. It's not hard to picture our Savior, then, pleading even now before His Father for every covenant blessing that was purchased by His blood to be applied to those for whom those blessings were purchased.

I raise the matter of Christ's intercession this morning because in our text we see Christ making reference to something He could pray for but wouldn't. Notice again what verse 53 says: *Thinkest thou that I cannot now pray to my Father, and he shall presently give me more than twelve legions of angels?* Such words should move us to fear and trembling for they indicate to us most plainly that had Christ chosen deliverance for Himself there would have been no way our deliverance could be accomplished.

It's important, I think, to picture the setting in which Christ made this statement. We're told in v. 50 *Then came they, and laid hands on Jesus, and took him.* It may seem like a

small thing, especially in comparison to the brutal treatment our Savior would soon receive. But what audacity that sinful men could actually lay hands on the holy Son of God and apprehend and arrest Him. And it was while these sinful men held Jesus that he responded to Peter's hasty act of drawing his sword and cutting off the ear of the high priest's servant that Christ said to Peter *Put up again thy sword into his place: for all they that take the sword shall perish with the sword. Thinkest thou that I cannot now pray to my Father, and he shall presently give me more than twelve legions of angels?*

Now you and I rejoice today in Christ's intercessory prayers for His people. It's proper to remember His intercession when we remember His broken body and shed blood. But here's an instance where we can humbly thank God for a prayer request that He didn't make and that He wouldn't make to His Father when He was apprehended in the garden of Gethsemane.

And the question I want to consider this morning is simply this – why? Why would Christ refuse to pray for His own deliverance if His deliverance was so near at hand? Knowing what awaited Him and knowing how undeserving sinners are for the least blessing, why would Christ not pray for those legions of angels to be cut loose?

The first reason I would suggest to you this morning as to why Christ didn't pray for the aid of those angels was:

## I. Because His Kingdom Advances Spiritually and not Carnally

It's important to note the context to Christ's saying in order to understand Him correctly. In v. 52 the Lord instructs Peter to *Put up again thy sword into his place: for all they that take the sword shall perish with the sword*. Christ's kingdom, you see, would not go forward that way. You might be tempted to wonder at these words of Christ especially since earlier at the Passover supper He seems to indicate that it was time to take up arms.

Luke gives us the account of Christ seemingly addressing that issue to His disciples: So we read in Lk. 22:36ff *And he said unto them, When I sent you without purse, and scrip, and shoes, lacked ye any thing? And they said, Nothing. 36 Then said he unto them, But now, he that hath a purse, let him take it, and likewise his scrip: and he that hath no sword, let him sell his garment, and buy one. 37 For I say unto you, that this that is written must yet be accomplished in me, And he was reckoned among the transgressors: for the things concerning me have an end. 38 And they said, Lord, behold, here are two swords. And he said unto them, It is enough.*

Spurgeon devotes the entire introduction to his sermon on our text to explaining how the disciples completely missed Christ's meaning by drawing attention to two swords. When you think about it, it's not hard to conclude that they mistook His meaning. Would two swords really be adequate for a band of 11 to defend themselves against a multitude armed with clubs and swords? Christ was marking a new chapter, so to speak, in what the disciples would experience. No longer would they be received joyfully. They would

instead be regarded as enemies to the nation. The book of Acts certainly bears that out when the followers of Christ would be scattered from Jerusalem. But even in that scattering we see that they didn't use physical swords but utilized spiritual weaponry which was way more powerful.

And when you think further upon Christ's words, they can make you wonder – was there an escape clause in the covenant of redemption? When Christ covenanted with His Father in eternity past about the plan of salvation and what Christ would have to do and suffer in order for that plan to be executed and accomplished did His Father say to Him – *now if at any time you change your mind and decide that it's just not worth it and the things you'll have to suffer will be too great, or if you decide that guilty rebellious sinners are just not worth redeeming then there will be 12 legions of angels at your disposal. Call on me and I'll send them.*

Was that really part of the arrangement between Christ and His Father? I don't think so. Were that the case there would not have been need for Christ's struggle in the garden where He prayed with such intense agony that He sweat great drops of blood. You see, in a sense Christ had already been through that battle and had won it. He found the needed grace and strength to go forward with His atoning death. As awful as His sufferings would be and especially how awful would be the forsaking by His Father, still He had the matter settled in His mind and heart that He would go forward with His atoning death.

What need would there have been for Him to pray *Father, if it be possible remove this cup from me, nevertheless, not by will but thine be done*, had an escape clause been in place by calling on angels to deliver Him? There would have been no need for such fervent agony.

The point that Christ is making to Peter and the disciples by this statement that He could call for 12 legions of angels is the point that had it been God's design for His kingdom to advance that way then He could do much better than 11 men armed with two swords. He could call on His Father for 12 legions of angels.

But this was not the way His kingdom would advance. And it's worth noting especially in such times as we find ourselves today with such heated and intense vitriol between clashing political forces that: *the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strong holds* – 2Cor. 10:4. Our armor consists of the shield of faith, and the helmet of salvation, and the breastplate of righteousness. And our sword is designed to sever the connection between soul and spirit but not soul and body. Our sword is the word of God and the gospel of Christ. Other religions may advance through the use of the sword and even apostate Christianity during the dark ages may advance that way, but Christ Himself would not advance His cause that way, nor does He expect His followers to do so.

There's something else worth noting under this heading with regard to our Savior's words. There is an emphasis in our Savior's words and actions in this setting, you see, on the voluntariness of His sufferings. Spurgeon suggests that even though there was a sense

in which Christ was armed with 12 legions of angels, still He would not draw that sword, so to speak, but would go forward to His sufferings and death. And in so doing He would lay the foundation for His kingdom.

So as we remember Christ around His table today, let's worship and thank Him for the way He went to the cross. Instead of calling on His Father for 12 legions of angels we're able to read instead that *He is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he openeth not his mouth* (Isa. 53:7).

There's another similar reason as to why Christ wouldn't call on His Father to send 12 legions of angels. It's –

## II. Because He had Already Said that He Would Suffer

Christ, you see, gives a very specific answer as to why He would not call on His Father to send 12 legions of angels. He gives His answer in the form of a rhetorical question: Look at the words of our text again and note the verse that follows: *Thinkest thou that I cannot now pray to my Father, and he shall presently give me more than twelve legions of angels? 54 But how then shall the scriptures be fulfilled, that thus it must be?*

Christ was very concerned at all times with the Scriptures being fulfilled. A couple of verses later He expresses that same concern again. So we read in v. 55: *In that same hour said Jesus to the multitudes, Are ye come out as against a thief with swords and staves for to take me? I sat daily with you teaching in the temple, and ye laid no hold on me. 56 But all this was done, that the scriptures of the prophets might be fulfilled.*

Some have wondered whether or not the words of v. 56 belong to Christ or belong to Matthew, the author of this gospel. A comparison of this account with the words of Mark and Luke make it very clear that these words about the Scriptures being fulfilled are the words of Christ. And it's no small wonder that Christ would have such a concern. After all He is the Word of God – *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God.*

If Christ was the One who gave His word to the prophets then is it any wonder that He would be concerned for keeping His word? And what was that word? It was certainly His word that He must suffer before entering into His glory. You remember the account of the Emmaus road disciples in Lk. 24? So we read in v. 25: *Then he said unto them, O fools, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken: 26 Ought not Christ to have suffered these things, and to enter into his glory? 27 And beginning at Moses and all the prophets, he expounded unto them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself.*

You begin to see how incompatible such an action would be for Christ to call on His Father to send 12 legions of angles, when Christ had already revealed the plans for the ages? He had already given His word that He would suffer. Indeed from as far back as the garden of Eden when Adam and Eve fell by their sin, God's word to Adam and Eve was that Christ would come and would crush the serpents head and in the process would also suffer a bruising to His own heel. This is known as the proto-evangelium which means the

first gospel. It's found in Gen. 3:15 *And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel.* In a sense everything that follows that verse in Genesis is an unfolding of Gen. 3:15. I've often said it would have been great to have sat in that Bible class with Christ and those Emmaus road disciples.

We no doubt would have heard much and learned much but even without attending that class, so to speak, we do learn by what's revealed in Lk. 24 what we should look for when we read our Bibles. We should look for Christ and we should look for the theme of the sufferings of Christ and the glory that follows. This was the very thing that the prophets sought to understand themselves. So Peter writes in 1Pet 1:10,11 *Of which salvation the prophets have enquired and searched diligently, who prophesied of the grace that should come unto you: Searching what, or what manner of time the Spirit of Christ which was in them did signify, when it testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ, and the glory that should follow.*

Our time around the Lord's table this morning serves the same purpose. It brings to our remembrance the condescension of Christ in becoming a man and it brings to our remembrance the suffering of Christ in the shedding of His blood. So you see why Christ could not and would not call on His Father to send those angels? He had already given His Word as to what would happen. And not only had He given His Word but He had inscripturated that Word – i.e. He had guided the prophets under the inspiration of His Spirit so that they would write exactly what He directed them to write.

And unlike sinful men, or unlike politicians who will tell you anything and then back off what they say and find excuses for doing other than what they say, Christ keeps His word. We can thank Him for that this morning. He's true to His word because He's true to Himself and though His word would speak of horrendous suffering and death and the shedding of His blood, He would see the matter through because He had given His word.

So is here is a petition that Christ would not pray and in a sense could not pray. For Christ to pray for His own deliverance through the aid of angels would have kept His kingdom from being established. And it would have been inconsistent with the word He had already given. I'll give one more reason why Christ would not pray to His Father for 12 legions of angles:

### III. Because it Would have been Inconsistent with the Ministry of Angels

In that chapter I mentioned a moment ago, 1Peter 1, I reminded you how the prophets searched out salvation. Angels are mentioned also in that chapter – *which things the angels desire to look into.* In other words angels are attracted to the glory of God in salvation. Even though it doesn't affect them directly, they are nevertheless drawn to it because they so readily perceive such a magnificent display of the glory of God in it.

Mention is made, you will recall, of another instance where we actually do see legions of angels. We're coming to that season in the year when much attention is given to the

incarnation of Christ and mention will be made of the birth of Christ from Matthew's gospel and Luke's gospel. After an angel tells the shepherds of the birth of Christ we read in Lk. 2:12 *And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, 14 Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.*

This text makes reference to a multitude of angels. Christ makes reference to legions of angels. A legion consisted of 6,000 Roman soldiers so Christ is saying that up to 72,000 angels would have been available to Him had such a thing been consistent with the plan of the ages. 72,000 would certainly qualify as a multitude.

But as that multitude of angels celebrated the incarnation of Christ, how would it have been for them to have come and delivered Christ from His persecutors and thus put an end to the very purpose for which Christ had become a man? It would have been within their capability to be sure. In 2Kings 6 you might recall how the city of Samaria was surrounded by Syrians and the prophet Elisha was inside. And his servant was very fearful about what seemed to be the inevitable fate of the city and then Elisha prayed that his servant eyes would be opened and when the Lord answered prayer that servant saw a multitude of angels in chariots who turned the tide for the besieged city that day.

And when Jerusalem was surrounded by the Assyrians during the reign of Hezekiah it only took the work of a single angel to destroy 185,000 Assyrians. So angels were certainly familiar with the mission of coming to the rescue. But in each instance their mission contributed to the advancement of redemption but for Christ to call on them for His own personal deliverance would not have advanced redemption. It would have ended redemption.

For redemption to be accomplished, you see, Christ must go forward. He must go forward to the cross. He must bear shame and scoffing rude. He must subject Himself to untold sufferings which would culminate in His being forsaken by His Father. It's worth noting that in the account Luke gives us of His agony in prayer in the garden of Gethsemane, we read how He actually did receive aid from an angel at that time.

When he prayed in Lk. 22:42 *Father, if thou be willing, remove this cup from me: nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done.* We read in the next verse – v. 43 *And there appeared an angel unto him from heaven, strengthening him.* The ministry of angels, then, is to advance the cause of Christ's kingdom and the gospel of Christ. They continue that ministry to this very day.

In expounding the superiority of Christ to angels the author of Hebrews writes: *But to which of the angels said he at any time, Sit on my right hand, until I make thine enemies thy footstool? 14 Are they not all ministering spirits, sent forth to minister for them who shall be heirs of salvation?* (Heb. 1:13,14).

So Christ would never call on angels to perform a duty that would run counter to salvation. Their task was to celebrate salvation when the Son of man was born. And their function would be to strengthen Christ that He may go forward with His gracious, though

painstaking plan. And their ministry is to serve as agents of God's providence even today in such a way that they serve the heirs of salvation.

I said in the beginning of this study that Christ's intercessory ministry is essential to our salvation. He bases that ministry in His finished work. And He prays that all those who come to Him will be saved to the uttermost. And on account of His ministry of intercession there can be no condemnation to our souls. How could there be when He bases His intercession on His atoning death.

Our text does furnish us with another form of Christ's intercession, one that could have led to His deliverance. Let's thank God this morning that He had already chosen our deliverance even over His own. Let's thank Him in our remembrance of Him today that He followed through and fulfilled the Scriptures and in so doing made certain the salvation of all those that would put their trust in Him.